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ABSTRACT

As revealed in personal interviews, periodicals, published and unpublished manuscripts, and school records, the teachers were the key factor in bringing education and culture to the frontier that was western South Dakota. Many teachers were girls of 16 or 17, inexperienced, hired from states to the east (Minnesota and Iowa), sight unseen. Beginning in 1862, teachers were required to be certified by taking examinations in reading, writing, geography, grammar, spelling, and arithmetic. Supplies and equipment were limited: there was usually a blackboard, a recitation desk, desks for children, a teacher's desk and chair, maps, sometimes a globe and piano or organ, and always a water pail and dipper. School books were furnished by the pupils so there was no uniformity in textbooks. At school the teacher was janitor, superintendent, principal, playground supervisor, office girl, producer and director of programs, and organizer of community picnics and social events. Social restrictions required that teachers observe a nightly 11:00 P.M. curfew. Living conditions provided little privacy or comfort; many teachers boarded with school families, sharing rooms with one or more of their pupils. Some teachers stayed in the schoolhouse, living out of a suitcase and sleeping on a fold-up cot. (NEC)

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READING, WRITING, 'RITHMETIC AND RECITATION
IN WESTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

March 3, 1981

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RC 013071

READING, WRITING, 'RITHMETIC AND RECITATION
IN WESTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

As settlers came to western South Dakota, they brought with them the desire for education for their children. Education was the path to a better life for their children. As soon as circumstances permitted, they started schools, using whatever building they could find, hiring for teachers anyone who was even slightly eligible. One hears or reads again and again about how hard the early settlers struggled to provide a school and to get their children there to attend it.

From the 1880's until World War I homesteaders organized schools wherever there were enough children to maintain one. About 1910 the first homesteaders east of Oelrichs built their own school, furnished it, and hired a teacher several years before an official school district was formed. Once it was, they turned their school over to the proper authorities.¹ Many of these homesteaders were middle-aged family men who had been board members back home; so they knew how to get schools started, even though the buildings might be crude, and they lacked the kind of equipment they had known back east. This same development took place everywhere as districts came into existence.

In 1862 the first territorial legislature made a legal provision for the district unit of school control. At the beginning the district officers were director, clerk, and treasurer, each elected for one year.

¹Carrie Fey, personal interview, December, 1980.

There was an annual meeting of electors in these early days, at which the whole community considered the levy of a school tax, the location of the school building, and the length of the school year, which was not to be less than three months. The state law also stated that there must be at least seven pupils to constitute a school, although this rule was not very strictly followed in western South Dakota.¹

Marie Patterson says of her first school in Meade County:

Our building was my fourteen by sixteen shack and the class was eleven children who came in assorted sizes. We did not have desks in rigid rows bolted to the floor. In fact, we did not have desks, just a few tables and chairs. The McCoy, the Wilcox, the Ham, and the Hertz children attended this learning center for three months in the fall and three months in the spring when they were not otherwise occupied.²

Pearle Rietmann said of her teaching career in Meade County:

When I first started teaching about 1918 there were no organized schools as such, therefore I had to get out and hustle up the seven pupils required by law before a school could be started. There were few children at that time but I managed to get enough signed to start school.

The schoolhouse was an abandoned claim shack, no equipment whatever, but we managed by supplying our own, a few chairs, a couple small tables, a board painted black answered for a blackboard. We had no books or writing material except what we brought from home. Fortunately these children were small so it wasn't hard to teach them to read, write, spell and do simple problems. However the school was only a short one as two families moved away leaving only two children.

The next school was also a short three month term. The owner had proved up on his claim and left. It was in a dugout, the house partly built into the side of a hill about seven miles from home. Mrs. John Magnuson cleaned the place up as best she could the day before school started. Two of her children, Amelia and Herbert, were my pupils... It was a cold winter, there was no fuel supplied, the children and I had to pick up twigs and branches from a nearby creek to burn in the tiny stove. I don't think we were comfortable at any time.³

¹G. Justin Bale, "Development of Territorial Education of the Black Hills of South Dakota (unpublished thesis), p. 39.

²Marie Patterson, Central Meade County Prairie Schools, p. 313.

³Pearle Rietmann, Central Meade County Prairie Schools, p. 322.

Who were the teachers in these country schools? From the earliest days and into the present time they were and still are ranchers' wives and ranchers' daughters. In early times there were eastern girls from Iowa and Minnesota, and more eastern states, too, who came out west to be teachers. They were hired before they left home, sight unseen, and surely most of them did not know what they were getting into. Some wanted adventure, which they had. Some wanted a man, which they surely found. Teachers rarely lasted more than a year or two before being proposed to by some cowboy or two or three.

In 1918 Miss Marie Sawyer came to be teacher at Lane Johnny school. She started school with us again the next year but during the Christmas vacation she and Henry Sieger were married... In 1920 Oleanna Larsen was teacher at Lane Johnny. One day during Miss Larsen's term, Carty Ash of Oral came to visit--school? Well, he came to visit anyway. There was a slightly flustered teacher and a room full of very wise pupils with a few hushed giggles scattered around. Before the next school year, Oleanna Larsen and Carty Ash were married. That meant a new teacher for 1921-22.

Johnson Downen was a young man whose family baled hay for a living. Maude Metcalf, a young schoolteacher, came to live with his parents and taught school nearby. It was during this year that a lasting romance developed. Maude's next year was spent with the Gregerson family and she taught school at the Summit school. During her third year of teaching she and Johnson were married at Christmas time.²

Walter Hellman told of playing for dances.

Those first years in the Millboro community are long remembered for not only for the primitive ways, but for the sociability and good times we had. Dances were held in barns, in new houses... We danced until early morning. The fiddler was paid a dollar and a half usually, sometimes it was free gratis. At one of these dances I met a school teacher, who had come from Lincoln, Nebr. to teach in Tripp county. I was bearing down on the fiddle bow that night. When school was out in May the teacher, Ethel King, became my wife.³

¹Verda Arnold, Our Yesterdays, pp. 140-41.

²"Johnson Downen Families," Our Yesterdays, p. 388.

³Ruth Hamilton, Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 158.

Mr. and Mrs. Carl Storm lived on a homestead in Tripp county, too. Ethel boarded with Mr. and Mrs. Storm that year.

Several bachelors in the neighborhood found out what good bread she (Mrs. Storm) could bake and for many years three or four of them came each Sunday to buy their weeks' supply of bread from her. One year she kept the school teacher in their home and that spring one bachelor was a married man. He had outstayed the others on Sunday evening. The school teacher became Mrs. Walter Hellman.

The role of the teacher in the community was an important one because people attached much importance to education and wanted it for their children. So the person to whom they entrusted their children to get education was important. She was a cultural leader in the community. There was an interest in everything she did or said or wore, especially if she were a stranger.

Often it seems a teacher in an early school was a person on a pedestal, yet a nonentity. She was expected to be a leader because of education, a paragon of virtue, and a moral inspiration and example. However, she had no real place in the adult social life of a community, no influence in politics nor in the everyday workings of a community.²

The most proper thing for a girl to do when I was young was to prepare herself to teach school. This was especially true in rural communities. I wrote a teacher's examination at a very young age, unfortunately or fortunately, I passed the examination. So I began teaching.³

At school the teacher was janitor, superintendent, principal, playground supervisor, office girl, producer and director of programs, and organizer of community picnics and social events.

A few men taught in country schools. In the Custer County Superintendent's Register of School Officers (school board members) for

¹"The Storms Missed Meals to Homestead in County", Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 165.

²Frances C. Repass, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 120.

³Agnes Parr, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 110.

the years 1891 to 1919 there were about four women for every one hundred male board members listed. At least 90 percent of the teachers who were supervised and managed by these men were women.

As the times worsened during the depression, more young men taught because other jobs were so scarce, but never were they more than a small minority.

School board members, during the early days and in the depression, out of desperation to find a teacher for their kids, did not worry too much about qualifications.

At Lama Johnny the teacher quit at Christmas. One day a Mr. Harry McDonald came to Buffalo Gap looking for work. How did he get in touch with Father? And why did Father ask if he could teach school? There is no one now who can answer these questions. Lama Johnny needed a teacher; Mr. McDonald made application and was accepted. Probably without any questions asked. He was a good teacher in one way. He was able to explain and make us want to learn. He was a good disciplinarian and we all adored him. But this was too good to last. Mr. McDonald was wanted by the law. The details are vague and how he found out the "law" was so close is anyone's guess. He just disappeared and school was over for the rest of that year. No picnic, no program--just nothing. No one ever heard if he paid for his folly.

There were restrictions in some small communities that must have made a teacher's personal life difficult. Helen Greenfield wrote in her memoirs:

You have heard of curfew for students. Have you ever heard of curfew for teachers? Eleven o'clock was the hour when teachers were expected to be home in the small South Dakota town where I started my teaching career. This was known as "teachers' curfew" and it applied to men as well as women. It was a rule to be observed by everyone who planned events where teachers were expected to attend. No teacher tried to sneak in after curfew. If an individual thought of such a thing, he gave up the idea as impossible because his landlady surely would know of his misdemeanor.

¹Verda Arnold, Our Yesterdays, p. 140.

In those days a teacher lived in a rented room, usually an upstairs bedroom in a private home. Only the superintendent, the coach and possibly one or two other married faculty members had apartments or homes of their own. When single men or women came to town to teach, each rented a room in a private home. It was unthinkable for a couple of young women to live in an apartment where they could entertain as they pleased.

Living in a single bedroom was not one of the specified rules; it was an economic necessity... Such restrictions left little room for freedom. One did not take the liberty of entertaining friends nor undertaking any noisy activity in someone else's private home. The room was simply a place to retire after a day's work at school.

More important than any social restrictions were the living conditions which a teacher in the country had to endure when she boarded with some families. One teacher wrote:

My bedroom was an unfinished attic room with an outside stairway which at times was slick with ice and snow. Before going to bed, the room was heated with a small wood and coal stove; we used a kerosene lamp. I kept my clothes under the covers so they would be warm in the morning; sometimes my bed was covered with snow. I would go downstairs to wash, eat breakfast, take my school bag and lunch pail to start walking one and one-half miles to school.²

During the winter, if one boarded with a family with children, it meant eating all meals with the children, teaching them all day, spending the evening with them, and probably sharing a room with one or more of them. In the winter the bedrooms were cold; so one could not retreat there but must spend the evening near the stove with the whole family.

Laura Jane Platte remembered:

I stayed out in the country during the week, boarding and rooming in a ranch home about a mile from the school to which I walked, of course. The advantage in that home was the warm feather bed I had for cold wintery nights, and the disadvantage was the two adopted boys who felt they were privileged to be little pests in my classroom.³

¹ Helen Greenfield, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 51.

² Harriet Johnson, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 70.

³ Laura Jane Platte, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 112.

A surprising number of teachers have said that they preferred to stay at the schoolhouse rather than with some patron. It was inconvenient in many ways, but it ensured a certain amount of privacy and peace and quiet.

To live comfortably in the schoolhouse, the teacher would have a kerosene stove in a cloakroom and a fold-up cot to put down in the schoolroom. She lived out of a suitcase. The toilets were outside, but so it was at home, too. She ate at her desk and used a kerosene lamp to correct papers or sew in the evening. No telephone, no radio, and the nearest neighbor a mile or more over the hill. Her husband took her the fifteen miles to school on Monday morning, or on Sunday evening if the roads or weather were bad, and came after her on Friday afternoon. His life on the ranch by himself was even lonelier than hers; at least she had the school children every day.¹

Some even kept a child with them at the schoolhouse if the child's ranch home was too far from school for the trip to be made every day. One lady wrote: "Another year I stayed in a one-room teacherage. I kept a little boy with me during the five days; we curtained off a corner of the classroom for his little bedroom."²

There were a few teacherages. Sometimes the teacherage was a room built directly onto the side or back of the schoolhouse. Sometimes it was a separate building. Teacherages usually had the same facilities as the schoolhouse. If the schoolhouse had a wood or coal stove, so did the teacherage. If the school had no water, neither did the teacherage.

¹Carrie Fey, personal interview.

²Harriet Johnson, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 70.

If gas or kerosene lamps were used in the schoolhouse, the teacher had a gas or kerosene lamp at the teacherage.

Why did teachers stay at the teacherage or at the schoolhouse when they lived only fifteen miles away? Probably they had only one vehicle, and her husband needed it. Bringing her in the morning and coming after her at night interfered with chores and milking; things that needed to be done before dark, especially in winter in those days before rural electrification. Besides, it was too expensive in the depression to travel that thirty miles every day. The country road which was the closest route was only a trail across the prairie, little traveled, and in winter, before the days of four-wheel vehicles, likely to be impassable. To go around on better and more traveled roads was twice as long a trip.

Quite often traveling to school meant a long walk for both teacher and pupils. One lady remembered:

I would take my school bag and lunch pail to start across the prairie walking the one and one-half miles on a cold winter day through deep snow with no fence nor guide to follow. This was dangerous when road tracks were covered with new snow and blizzard conditions were beginning to arise. The two little boys from this home walked with me, which made it a difficult problem in the cold. To get the fire started, the room warm, and try to wipe away the frozen tears with the cold fingers.

Lucille Hartshorn recalled her school days when her aunt, Jennie Buen, was her teacher.

In the early fall they (Lucille and Jennie) traveled the seven miles with a horse and buggy. Ray's homestead shack was refinished, inside and out, and moved down just east of the school yard, for Jennie and Lucille to live in from Monday through Friday. In the spring of 1927 a blizzard and extremely heavy snowfall created travel problems for several weeks--first the snow drifts and then the flood waters. They rode

¹Harriet Johnson, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 70.

horseback and carried the week's supply of food, clothing, etc. with them.¹

? School was very important, and the children came to these often uncomfortable schoolhouses by whatever means they could get there. They walked, rode horseback, drove a horse and cart or horse and buggy, were brought in a wagon, or on a bobsled behind a team. Paul Schnose said:

We traveled the seven miles to school each day in a buckboard pulled by two horses. The next year... Arthur rode a saddle horse and I rode a pinto Shetland pony, bareback.²

Marian O'Bryan said:

We had to walk two and one-half miles to school over country that was rough. We also had to cross two creeks, that in the spring of the year always overflowed. These and the draws were hard to cross and many times we would have to rely on the railroad bridge to cross Lane Johnny Creek.³

Dorothy Harmon remembered experiences with Lane Johnny Creek:

One time when I was about six years old Mr. John Hackel, who lived up the east side of the creek, hitched his team to the wagon to come to the schoolhouse to get all the children who lived on the east side of the creek as it was terribly high this time. When we got to the creek and started to cross, we didn't understand Mr. Hackel's seriousness but the wagon started going downstream and the horses were having a difficult time trying to keep going. The wagon was full of children but after what must have seemed a very long time to Mr. Hackel we finally got to the other side...⁴

We rode horseback to school when the weather was not too cold. When it got too cold to ride we drove a team on a spring buggy. Then we could bundle up in robes made of "pants cloth and overalls". The older boys changed off driving because their hands got so cold. We put hay in the bottom of the box with several big flat rocks that had been heated in the oven at home and on the stove at school.⁵

¹ Lucille Hartshorn, Our Yesterdays, p. 314.

² Paul Schnose, Our Yesterdays, p. 80.

³ Marian O'Bryan, Our Yesterdays, p. 169.

⁴ Dorothy Harmon, Our Yesterdays, p. 246.

⁵ Violet Pierce, Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 173.

Zelma and Joe Norman drove four and one-half miles to the Harrison Flat school in a one-horse cart pulled by a faithful old horse called Inger, which their dad had purchased from an Indian for a dead cow.¹

Tom Norman, from the time he was seven until he was twelve, rode seven miles on horseback to the Grieves school. During inclement weather he stayed with a family who lived closer to school.²

Horses were a big part of people's lives in those days. Mrs. Rietmann said that in 1925 when she taught at the Chaffee school in Meade county, most of the pupils rode to school, usually two to a horse. "In the spring there was a pond not too far from the schoolhouse and those youngsters would ride their horses out in the middle of it, turn them around end to end and make them kick at one another. What kids won't do!"³

The pupils of Anna Nelson rode horseback, too.

In 1920 I taught the Killian school in Haakon county... As some of the pupils rode horses, due to distance, I had a problem with them racing their ponies around the schoolhouse, especially at the noon hour after taking them to the dam to get water. I couldn't see where the drink did them much good, racing them back at full speed. So I had the riders copy a page or two about kindness to animals. I don't know if it did any good, but I felt better.⁴

In the northwestern part of South Dakota wild horses were a problem even to someone on horseback. Jennings Floden said that his father would not allow him to ride across one part of the open range even when he was seventeen because of the danger of meeting a wild stallion whose territory that was.⁵ E. C. Pellegrin told of wild horses coming up out of the breaks between his ranch home and the schoolhouse. "They were mean and would

¹Josephine Hazzelstrom, Our Yesterdays, p. 260.

²Audrey Norman, Our Yesterdays, p. 255.

³Pearle Rietmann, Central Meade County Prairie Schools, p. 323.

⁴Anna Hovland Nelson, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 102.

⁵Jennings Floden, personal interview.

chase anything; so my dog usually went to school with me. One day when they were giving me a worse time than usual, Sherm Strait came out and shot at them to keep them from me."¹

In 1893-94 the average term of South Dakota schools was 113 days or about five and one-half months. This was twenty-two days less than the national average of 135. By the 1913-14 term the average school term for South Dakota was 154, only four days less than the average for the nation. In 1929-30 the average was 172.7 days, but in 1933-34, due to the hard times of the depression, it went down to 171 days.²

Around 1889 the school term for the Harrison Flat school was usually four months beginning about October 1. By 1910 the term was divided into two sessions of three months in the fall and three in the spring.³

The clerk's record for the Elk Mountain school district for July 14, 1914, shows that the board decided to have eight months of school at the Dewey school, six months school at Elk Mountain school, and three months school at the Soper school. In 1915 they voted to have eight months school at both the Dewey school and the Soper school and to have school at Elk Mountain for three to six months. In July of 1917 they allowed nine months school at Dewey, eight months school at Sopers, and seven months school at Elk Mountain. There was no mention of the reason for the difference in lengths of term.⁴

Edwin Lathrop grew up in eastern Pennington county on a homestead north of Quinn. He said:

¹E. C. Pellegrin, Central Meade County Prairie Schools, p. 373.

²South Dakota State Planning Board, Elementary and Secondary Education in South Dakota, p. 2.

³John Harta, Our Yesterdays, p. 332.

⁴Elk Mountain School District, Clerk's Record Book.

Schools always have to have a beginning and in 1908 school was held in our neighborhood for one month... There was no school in the winter, only in the spring and the fall, and of course, no schoolhouse. In 1912 a schoolhouse was built and was named the Peno Basin School.

Many older boys went to school only when the ranch work was done. Sometimes they were older than the teacher; almost always they were bigger than she. If they respected the teacher, they helped keep the younger ones in line; otherwise, they were a discipline problem.² Mildred Kaufman had that problem. "Another big boy was a very difficult discipline problem until all at once, he got a crush on me. That solved all those problems."³

Ruth Elliott wrote about her father, Ben Miller:

When work was slow he went to school, as was frequently the custom then, work came ahead of school... When he was seventeen years old he went back to school. He had left home when he was thirteen or fourteen years old and struck out for himself.⁴

In 1894, 81.7 percent of the children in South Dakota were enrolled in school. Most of the population of South Dakota at that time was east of the river in small towns or on thickly populated farm land. Twenty years later, by 1914, the population had spread over the thinly settled western half. Times were tough for the settlers, and it was difficult to have schools when families lived so far from one another. Only 67.9 percent of the children were enrolled. Times were better in the twenties, but by 1934 the depression was felt everywhere, and only 7.8 percent of the children in South Dakota were enrolled in school.⁵

¹Edwin Lathrop, Eastern Pennington County Memories, p. 370.

²Carrie Fey, personal interview.

³Mildred Kaufman, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 80.

⁴Ruth Elliott, Our Yesterdays, p. 222.

⁵South Dakota Planning Board, Elementary and Secondary Education in South Dakota, p. 18.

In the late 1880's and early 1900's salaries were low. After the first World War they were increased and were their best in the 1920's. From the record book of the Directors of Harrison school township comes the following:

August 13, 1889. At a meeting held this day... the scale of teacher's salaries shall be as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| First grade certificate | \$40.-45 per month |
| Second grade certificate | \$35.-40 per month, |
| Third grade certificate | \$30. per month ¹ |

Zelma Sweeney said: "I taught one year at the Bender school on Squaw Creek, 1903-04... My salary was \$30. a month and I paid \$10. a month for room and board."² Floyd Cocking wrote about his first job in 1906:

"First grade certificate from Aberdeen Normal School; \$110 per month; highest paid graduate out that year; the job teaching fifth to eighth grades at Pringle in the Black Hills."³

When the depression came salaries went down. Sylvia Warren recalled: "During the depression finally a contract came from a school east of Hermosa at \$75. a month. I paid \$20. for room and board. The next two years I taught at the Lane Johnny school and received \$50. a month and lived at home."⁴ The pinch of the depression manifested itself by the petition presented to the Harrison School Board asking them not to hire married teachers. "It was then moved, seconded and carried not to hire any married woman who has an able bodied husband."⁵ This rule persisted in many places until World War II and the shortage of teachers then.

¹ John Barta, Our Yesterdays, p. 332.

² Zelma Sweeney, Our Yesterdays, p. 263.

³ Lloyd Cocking, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 26.

⁴ Sylvia Warren, Our Yesterdays, p. 275.

⁵ John Barta, Our Yesterdays, p. 332.

Pearle Walker was one of many teachers who took a homestead and taught while she proved up on her claim. She said:

I had seventeen pupils... At the end of the month it was an eighteen mile trek around the township to get my pay. If a member of the board wasn't home I would have to go around again on Sunday. Did it all on horseback.¹

A teacher had to have a certificate before she could teach. The first certification law, written in 1862, stated that the county superintendent was to examine all teachers who offered themselves for service, in moral character, learning, and ability to teach. Certificates were limited to one year.

In 1879 provisions were made for the Superintendent of Public Instruction to prescribe the requirements for first, second, and third grade certificates.² To become certified anyone could take the tests given annually by the County Superintendent. One's grades on the various parts determined the kind of certificate one received. Tests were given in reading, writing, geography, grammar, spelling, and arithmetic. Later, United States history, civics, physiology, bookkeeping, current events, art, and theory and practice were added.

Such a certificate read:

This is to certify that _____ has been examined and found competent to give instruction in orthography, writing, arithmetic, English grammar and geography and having exhibited satisfactory evidence of good moral character is authorized to teach these branches in any common school within this county.³

This paper was signed by the County Superintendent and was good only in the county in which it was issued.

¹Pearle Walker Curtis, Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 144.

²G. Justin Bales, "Development of Territorial Education of the Black Hills of South Dakota, 1876-1890, (unpublished thesis), p. 39.

³J. Leonard Jennewein, editor, Dakota Panorama, p. 174.

Low scores meant one could be rejected. The Record Book for the Superintendent of Schools for Custer county from 1892 to 1919 contains a section labeled Rejected. It was a long list of people who took the tests and failed.

Mr. G. O. Van Meter who was County Superintendent in Tripp County, wrote:

I have in my possession a letter from an applicant living in Gregory county, asking "if I could place him in a school", and in said letter were seventeen misspelled words. I replied, "Yes, enter any of the primary schools, most of which will open September 5, and be careful to enroll in the spelling class."¹

In the early 1900's many high schools offered "normal" courses which prepared their students to teach. One part of those courses consisted of Senior reviews, in which they went over or reviewed all areas of knowledge: math, spelling, history, geography; all the areas they were likely to encounter when they took the teacher examinations. Young men and women as young as sixteen started to teach with a third grade certificate. If they studied diligently, or learned as they taught various subjects, they might advance to a second grade certificate when they took the tests the next year. A first grade certificate was difficult to attain and usually required teaching experience and one or two years at a normal school. In the middle 1920's more and more teachers began to attend normal schools to secure a certificate.

Renewals were possible without taking the tests again. By the early 1930's few were taking the tests. 1934 was the date of the last recorded test scores in Custer county. All certificates after that were issued for

¹G. O. Van Meter, Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 64.

attendance at normal school or college. It was difficult to find the money to attend school, especially during the depression. Many went to summer school and taught in the winter.

Qualification standards remained low for elementary teachers in South Dakota into the 1950's. In a Report of the Committee on Education of the South Dakota Legislative Research Council in 1954, the committee was concerned with the problem of teacher certification. In the 1953-54 school year there were still 212 "unqualified" teachers and 1215 permit teachers employed. To have a permit meant that one had less than one year of normal training; it could be as little as six weeks of summer school. At that time no other state ranked lower than South Dakota in the percentage of teachers who were college graduates. In South Dakota only 10 percent of the elementary teachers were college graduates. The highest ranking state at that time was Arizona where 97.5 percent of elementary teachers had degrees.¹

To overcome the lack of good education and teacher training among elementary teachers, county institutes were held every year at the county seat in every South Dakota county. Recorded in the Record Book of the Superintendent of Schools for Custer County was the first institute held there from July 20 to August 1, 1891. It lasted for ten days and was conducted by Mr. R. M. Jester. In 1894 fifty-five teachers attended, and in 1902 Professor G. W. Nash conducted classes for 96 teachers. There were lessons on how to teach, classes to provide information about various subjects such as geography and travel, and demonstrations in art and handicraft.²

¹South Dakota Legislative Research Council, Report of the Committee on Education, p. 6.

²Custer County Superintendent of Schools, Record Book, pp. 487-493.

It was a time for all these young women who led such quiet, hard working lives in the rural schools to get together in town for a few days. In the evenings, one lady remembers, they would go back to the meeting place and spend the evening copying new patterns to use during the school year.¹ Mr. Leo Seppala, who lived in Buffalo as a young man, remembered institutes as a time when all the young ladies of the county would be in town, and special programs would be held and would be open to the public as well as to the teachers. But the young ladies were the main attraction.²

Schoolhouses were cold in winter and extremely hot in the fall and late spring. The fire had to be started each morning, and on very cold mornings the schoolroom would not warm up until noon. One elderly lady told about a mother who came to school with her child and spent most every day there, sewing or doing needlework. Sometimes she helped students or listened to them read. She was a well-educated lady who was having hard times, and the teacher made her welcome for she suspected there was no money that winter to buy coal for the stove at home.³

Irene Griffin said:

The one-room unpainted schoolhouse was too hot if your desk was next to the stove, but you were cold if your seat was near the wall. During cold weather your feet were always cold. I don't believe children were as intelligent as they are now. Perhaps, some had plenty of potential but they had little guidance and not much to stimulate interest.⁴

Evelyn Howe said: "On chilly winter mornings we huddled around the wood stove to warm ourselves, then attended to thawing out the water pail and the ink bottles."⁵

¹Gertrude Banning, personal interview.

²Leo Seppala, personal interview.

³Grace Libby, personal interview.

⁴Irene Griffin, Our Yesterdays, p. 445.

⁵Evelyn Howe, Our Yesterdays, p. 253.

Supplies and equipment were adequate but limited. There was a blackboard, a recitation desk, double desks for the children, and later, single desks fastened together in a row, a teacher's desk and chair, maps, sometimes a globe, sometimes a piano or an organ, always a water pail and dipper. Later, a new innovation was a crockery water cooler with a lid. Some schools had wells; some had cisterns; at some the children and the teacher carried their water to school in covered syrup pails.

Over and over the fact is mentioned that school books were furnished by the pupils. "They used whatever books they had. There was no uniformity in textbooks. Reading, writing and arithmetic was the curriculum."¹

Julia Hall wrote:

In my early school days parents furnished textbooks. As a consequence there was often a lack. The only supplies furnished by the school board were chalk and erasers. Up till my last years in the grades I never saw a sheet of construction paper and I am quite sure all the other schools in my county were as unsupplied.²

The series of reading books called Blodgett's Reader was popular. Other reading series were School Reading by Grades by Baldwin, the Swinton Readers, the series called Progressive Course in Reading by Aldrich and Forbes, and the Heath Readers by Grades. Geographies included Natural School Geography, edited especially for the Dakotas and Minnesota by Redway and Hinman, First Steps in Geography by Frye, and Barnes Complete Geography by Montieth. One history book was A Primary History of the United States for Intermediate Classes by Donnelly. Golden Song Books were used for singing.

¹Ruth Elliott, Our Yesterdays, p. 222.

²Julia Hall, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 52.

The teachers of the common school districts used the South Dakota Course of Study. If they followed it conscientiously and had a good education in the basics, they could be successful teachers. The Course of Study was the teacher's Bible. She never prepared a lesson without consulting it. It listed every fact and every concept to be learned in every subject for every grade and gave ideas of what could be done to accomplish the learning of all of it. It was printed and published by the state of South Dakota and came from the office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Grace Lobdell Hammerquist, retired teacher, described her first teaching experience at the Dawkins school: "The dozen children and I religiously covered the work for each month as it was outlined in the big yellow State Course of Study."¹

Floyd Cocking taught his first year at the Pringle school in Custer county.

One of my seventh grade girls was pretty sharp and I had to hustle to keep her busy and challenged. And then I found the solution. Two of my fifth grade seemed to need more personal help than I had time to give so I had Anne start helping them. Within a week, she was my full-fledged teacher aide during parts of the day. She loved it. So did I. And everyone profited from it. Of course, she did not get paid. But she got a better education.

It seems we were to teach about six or eight subjects to each grade level... That would make twenty-five or thirty classes a day during a period from eight till three. Could you believe our shortest class was only five minutes? That was spelling. And our longest was twenty minutes. That was because I believe in a good math background. Some other doubling up had to be done so I put the fifth and sixth grades together in the same class for history the first semester and covered the fifth grade work. The second semester we did the sixth grade work. It was not too bad but did keep the teacher jumping without benefit of coffee breaks, free periods, relaxation or neighborly chats with other teachers.

¹Grace Lobdell Hammerquist, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 54.

We knew the subject material had to be covered from the Course of Study. But the teacher was not the final authority. He had to do his job well enough so that everyone in the eighth grade was qualified to graduate. The county superintendent prepared the final exams, mailed them to the president of the school board, who delivered them to the teacher the day of the final exam. After the student had written the examination, the papers were returned to the county office for marking. And if the grades were too low, the student flunked out and had to repeat another year. If a teacher had that happen, you can imagine how popular he was in the community. But the system seemed to encourage both the student and teacher to do a good job.

Questions like these taken from an old examination paper tested whether or not the Course of Study had been followed:

Grade VIII arithmetic: A man bought at a sale a team of horses for \$375. The terms of the sale were, 1 year's time at 6% interest, or 2% off for cash. The man accepted the latter condition and went to a bank and borrowed just enough money to pay the cash amount paying 8% interest. Did he gain or lose by choosing the second condition, and how much?

Grade VII spelling: Spell ten words to be pronounced by the teacher from a list made up by her from those words quite generally missed when the regular lessons were given, but which have since been studied.

Grade VI reading: You will write from memory one stanza from either "Barefoot Boy", "The Children's Hour", "Ode to a Waterfowl", or "Star Spangled Banner".

Grade V drawing: Each pupil will bring two potatoes. They will be placed on the desk in front so that the end of one overlaps the other. Draw them just as they seem.

Grade IV geography: Draw an outline map of South America and write the names of the oceans on the east and on the west of it.

Grade III geography: Write how you could make a little pool of water from water running in the street or road after a rain. If you have ever seen a lake or a stream of water, tell how you think it came there.

¹ Floyd Cocking, Memoirs of South Dakota Retired Teachers, p. 27.

Grade II language: The teacher will have on the board a liberal list of words already studied having the long and short sounds of a, e, i, and o. She will have each come to the board and mark the vowels of four of them.

Grade I reading: Write on the board a few sentences such as the following and have each pupil read for fluency and expression: "Mamma, I see you. Do you see me? I love you Mamma. Do you love me?"¹

Verda Arnold remembered taking the final eighth grade examination.

In the spring of 1922 a decree went out from somewhere that all seventh and eighth grade pupils must go to the county seat to write their final examination. There were four of us from Lane Johnny. Mason Peterson, Peter Sieger, Evelyn Maxon and me. Poor little country kids. We were all afraid of the big city. The idea of a FINAL test was bad enough. But to have to write such a test in a strange big building--oh no! Miss Carter assured us we all knew enough to pass. Then gave us added relief by offering to go along and just be there. We all passed.

The noon meal was a break in the day's hard work. Once lunch was eaten, the children played games, with the teacher usually playing with them. For these children so isolated on their ranches, this playtime must have been very good for them and filled a real social need. Sometimes recess would be skipped so the whole school could take a longer noon hour and go to a nearby pond to skate or a hill to slide down.

There were no hot lunch programs in those days. Most lunches consisted of a jelly sandwich with an apple or a plain piece of cake or a cookie; no waxed paper wrappings in those days. Fried egg sandwiches were big, with homemade bread. Sometimes biscuits, cornbread, or cold pancakes were all some children had, with lard instead of butter. Times were tough.

¹Quarterly Uniform Test and Review Questions, December, 1910.
²Verda Arnold, Our Yesterdays, p. 136.

In one community the five or six mothers took turns sending the ingredients for a hot dish, which the teacher heated on a kerosene stove, and all the children shared. Often it was only plain potato soup; milk and potatoes were two things most people had plenty of, but sometimes it was vegetable soup, macaroni and cheese, or hot cocoa.¹

Dorothy Harmon said,

... often our bread was frozen at noon, as we had to leave it (our lunches) in the anteroom. But there was a huge stove in the center of the room... We would toast our bread on top of the stove, and at least we had hot toast. The butter would melt and smoke... but Mrs. Van Pelt never said anything about it.²

A concomitant of rural schooldom was the dinner pail... a lard or syrup pail, a half-gallon size for one person, a gallon size for several. We always preferred to take individual lunches, but that was a luxury Mother was not much in favor of, as it meant five dinner pails to be scrubbed out each evening and well aired for the next day, so usually she reduced the number to two, or three at the most... The enjoyment of these school lunches had to be sharply whetted by hunger for they were anything but palatable in their own right. The flavor of sandwiches is not improved by remaining packed tightly in a pail for a half day, even if the glass of fruit sauce or preserves has not been spilled over them by the swinging of said pail on the way to school, or by its having been kicked over in the rumpus attendant upon the removal of wraps and overshoes. Cookies so closely packed go through a peculiar softening process making them altogether different from the crunchy discs Mother had baked. The apple, if any, was probably eaten at recess.

Other children's food usually looked more attractive than one's own and there was a universal bartering of lunches... We liked to trade edibles with the Van der Tuins. They had many cookies, coffee cakes and other baked delicacies made after Holland recipes... One family of children often brought fried egg sandwiches with the eggs fried soft, which gave a messy drippy effect... These sandwiches were not much in demand for trades. The liquid part of our lunch was cold water carried in a pail from a well a half-mile down the hill and drunk from a common dipper.³

¹Carrie Fey, personal interview.

²Dorothy Harmon, *Our Yesterdays*, p. 240.

³Faye Cashatt Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow*, pp. 105-106.

Programs, especially the Christmas program, were an important part of the school year. There was no television or radio, and the slow mode of travel made it impossible to go to town for entertainment; so the people in the community made their own. Some schools had programs to raise money to buy needed equipment.

It was very hard to manage with so few books and no equipment, but we had programs and box suppers to raise money to buy shades, lamps and supplies. These social affairs served as community gatherings and we usually borrowed a copper boiler and an oil stove and made coffee for the lunch.

Children gained much from the experience of getting up in front of people to act out a playlet, speak a piece, or perform in some other way. Because of the lack of pencils and paper and books, memorization was an important part of education. Some people in their eighties can still quote dozens of poems which they learned while in elementary school.

Verda Arnold wrote of her school days:

Much of the fun and joy of a country school was program time. It was probably looked forward to with as much trepidation as joy. For some there was always a little stage fright, for others there was none. Edna Hasser was a master hand when it came to programs. These consisted of group singing, solos and dialogs (little plays). Edna played the organ and the older pupils stood close enough to read the words. We "little kids" stood back and learned the words from them. A few days after being given our parts to learn, we used the "opening exercise" period for practice sessions. For those who would be taking part in more than one rendition there was no warning until the first "piece" was pretty much under control--then we received the lines we must learn for the dialogue or extra "piece". During program time there was usually a feeling of togetherness--a comradeship that was missing on just regular days. Now the big boys didn't tease the younger children so much and the whole school seemed interested in how well you spoke your piece.²

¹Mrs. Charles Heller, Tripp County 50th Anniversary, p. 131.

²Verda Arnold, Our Yesterdays, p. 136.

Sometimes the school program would precede a box social or pie social. Blanche Kaufman wrote:

How the girls worked to fix the nicest food that their limited supply would allow. And they worked in secret to make their boxes look as beautiful as possible; and how they hoped that the young man of their dreams would buy their box when it was auctioned off after the program. And sometimes, how disappointed they were when the most unkempt old bachelor in the neighborhood bought it.¹

Besides these programs, the schools in every county prepared for county spelling bees and declamation contests. Everyone, from first grade through eighth grade, took part; and the winners from each county went on to a state contest. But everyone was a winner because the practice involved to compete at the county level raised the ability of all to spell and to speak in front of a group.

Each school district within a county, while controlled by the local board, was directed and guided by the woman or man who was County Superintendent. The office was at the County Courthouse, and the Superintendent's job was not an easy one in the large counties of western South Dakota. It was an elective position so every two years the superintendent must travel through the county asking people to vote for him; an expensive, time-consuming, tiring chore in the days of travel by horseback or buggy.

The county superintendent's office was always a busy, busy place. There was always a rush on to get things done and meet the deadlines set for school reports and activities on the school calendar... Summer began with the census reports from the clerks. Then came the ordering of textbooks and supplies. Next came the completing and filing of the annual

¹ Blanche Kaufman, Mellette County Memories, p. 26.

reports from the school officers, followed by the stocking of textbooks and supplies. Then came the planning of the school calendar and the preparation of the annual school teachers' bulletin, which was the basic guide to be followed for the school term ahead, and mixed in with these regular duties, was always the problem of placing good teachers in the schools, who meet the certification regulations adopted by the State Department of Public Instruction.

The beginning of school brought teachers' meetings, institutes, etc., with the accompanying rush by teachers for library books, textbooks, and supplies. Each term brought its rally days, with spelling contests, speech contests, track meets, art exhibits, music festivals, and the County Y.C.L. Convention, at which time State Spelling Contestants and State Y.C.L. Delegates were selected... Eighth Grade Graduation was always a special day, a culminating activity for pupils, parents, teachers and the County Superintendent.

The young teachers in the rural schools knew they had much to learn and that they needed guidance from the county superintendent. Mrs. Carrie Conger said she was so inexperienced it was a wonder the pupils learned anything. But looking back, it seemed to one of her former pupils she had done well in spite of her inexperience, as she taught eighteen or twenty pupils in all eight grades.²

The teacher was the key factor; inexperienced, untrained, but conscientious and hard-working, the girls of sixteen and seventeen and older who were the early rural teachers did more than they ever knew to bring culture to the frontier that was western South Dakota.

¹Elmer Bell, Central Meade County Prairie Schools, pp. 12-13.

²Verda Arnuld, Our Yesterdays, p. 136.

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